

The Debate, the Pundits and the Voters

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Thursday night's debate between the two vice-presidential candidates, Joseph Biden and Sarah Palin, was the most eagerly awaited vice presidential debate ever, and certainly one of the strangest. One of the most interesting aspects of the debate was the difference between how the viewers and the pundits evaluated it. During the days leading up to the debate, we heard a great deal about how Palin just needed to exceed the expectations which had been set for her, while Biden had to avoid the temptation to lecture, condescend to his opponent, or talk too much.

The first cut of analysis after the election saw pundits of all stripes claiming that Palin had exceeded expectations. This was clearly true, but tells us more about how low the expectations were rather than how good Palin was. Palin's performance was erratic. On one hand, she was on message -- comfortable on camera and telegenic -- but she also clearly was not very knowledgeable on the issues, garbled in her syntax, overplayed her hand by constantly saying she was folksy and an outsider, rather than *demonstrating* this, and most importantly, offered Republican solutions that voters simply do not want. To the extent that she presented herself far better than she had during her interview with Katie Couric, Palin's debate was a success. However, she did not make a compelling case that she was ready to be president, or that she had the right solutions for America.

Interestingly, pundits focused on expectations while voters focused on mundane things like positions on issues and knowledge of these issues. While the punditry seemed to agree that Palin did not verbally implode and therefore had exceeded expectations, a CNN poll showed that voters viewed Biden as having won the debate by a margin of 51%-36%. A CBS poll showed that among uncommitted voters, Biden won by a substantial margin of 46%-21%. Tellingly, the same CNN poll showed Palin won the all important likeability question by a margin of 54%-36%. This demonstrates that a fair amount of voters like Palin but don't want to see her in national office.

Palin's forced folksiness, consisting largely of saying she is an outsider who speaks to, in her odd construction, "Joe Six-Pack American", did not seem to play well outside of the Republican base. Perhaps this is because ordinary American voters are a bit more sophisticated than pundits would like us to think. Maybe these ordinary American voters actually listened to the debate and determined that Palin simply is not ready for this position at this time. It is even possible that when they listened closely and heard the policies of George W. Bush presented with a different accent, but similar unfamiliarity with the English language, they decided that they simply didn't want four more years of those policies.

The voters saw something else in this debate that may have eluded pundits. They saw Joe Biden. Joe Biden has been a prominent and important senator for decades, so those of us who pay too much attention to politics feel we know him very well. However, it is possible to serve for

decades in the senate and remain virtually unknown outside of Washington DC and your home state. For many voters the debate was an opportunity to see more of Joe Biden for one of the first times.

While Biden may not have been as likeable as his Republican opponent, he was clearly very impressive to many voters. It turns out that his deep knowledge of many issues was not, as Sarah Palin would suggest, a weakness and that voters may want their leaders to understand the processes and substance of governance. While too dignified, or even too old, to throw around terms like "Joe Six-Pack American" and "hockey mom," Biden's blue collar credentials came across very clearly in that debate. He mentioned towns like Scranton and Wilmington on several occasions, discussed the financial environment in which he grew up and demonstrated that he also understands the economic concerns which many Americans face. He also reminded voters that Sarah Palin is not the only parent in this race and that men can also be committed and loving parents.

By exceeding expectations, Palin may have saved her future as a presidential candidate, should McCain lose, in 2012 or 2016. Palin demonstrated that she has the potential so appeal to ordinary Americans who can relate to her life experience, and, should she run in the future, will have time to learn the issues a bit. Palin, did not however, really do anything to help the McCain-Palin ticket. In the bigger campaign picture, the vice-presidential debate is, from the Republican side, essentially a lost opportunity. It is unlikely this debate will move many voters to the Republican ticket; and it almost certainly won't reverse the momentum Obama has enjoyed in the last week or two.